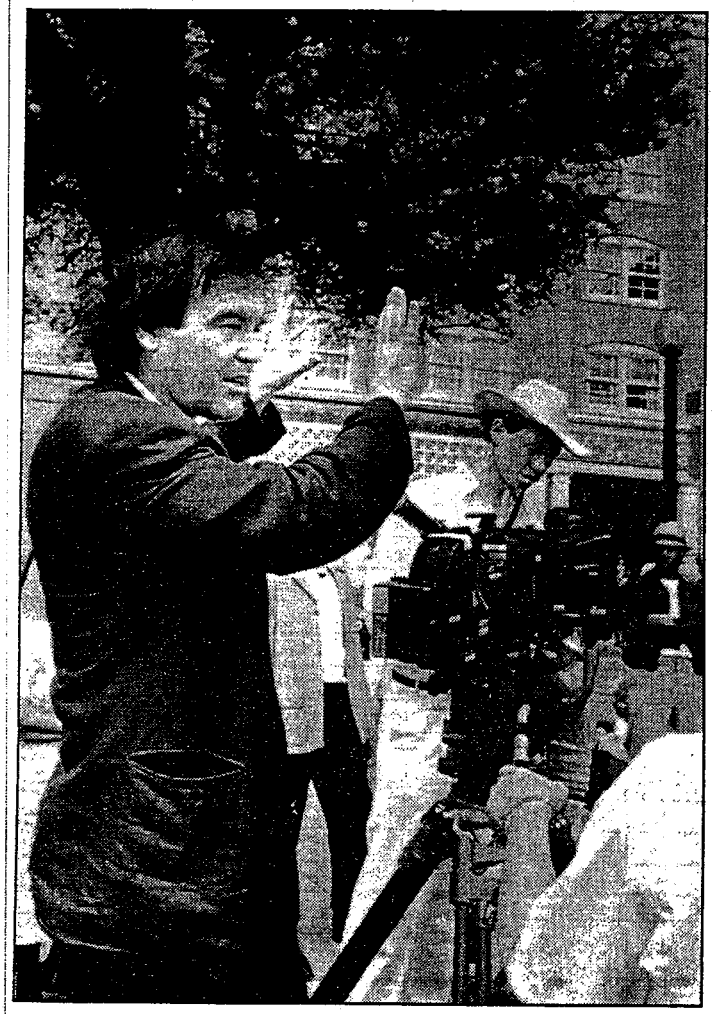
Assassination site still draws tourists



Associated Press

Director Oliver Stone directs his camera crew during the filming of "JFK" earlier this year at Dealey Plaza in Dallas. The movie is set to be released Dec. 20.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Academy Award-winning director Oliver Stone has been accused of scuttling history with his latest movie, "JFK." The plot has been shrouded in secrecy, but the vexing subject the movie tackles still seduces many to the scene of a president's assassination.

By JOHN A. BOLT

DALLAS (AP) — Dealey Plaza is much the same today as it was 28 years ago, but the events that happened there changed the rest of us in ways we'll never know.

Visitors trek to this spot on the west end of downtown as if to a shrine. You can see them every day: pointing, looking, wondering.

There's the window.

Here's "the grassy knoll."

Look, could this chip in the curb be from that day?

Here is where John Fitzgerald Kennedy — and innocence — died.

"You don't know what really happened," said Arlene Eppinga, standing in the plaza. Ms. Eppinga, from Walnut Creek, Calif., was visiting friends in a Dallas suburb and a trip to Dealey Plaza was a must.

"Everyone who comes here, you have to show it to 'em," said her guide, John Sittema.

Dallas also changed that day.

"It shocked the city into growing up. It may have begun a new era of maturity," says Pierce Allman, at the time director of programming and production at WFAA-TV and one of the first to report the shooting.

"It wasn't just a shock felt in Dallas, it was felt regionwide and nationwide," Mr. Allman says.

"It was when that fragile tissue of civility that barely holds us together was rudely shattered and it was so real to a lot of people because of radio and televison."

There are many theories on who killed Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963. The official version is that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, fired the fatal shots from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository on the north side of Dealey Plaza.

But there are many skeptics, including director Oliver Stone, whose upcoming movie, "JFK," opens Dec. 20. Though the movie's plot has been shrouded in secrecy, the Academy Award-winning director is said to offer up a solution to perhaps the most puzzling crime of the century. The Warner Bros. release stars Kevin Costner as Jim Garrison, Gary Oldman as Lee Harvey Oswald and Tommy Lee Jones as Clay Shaw.

Much of the movie was filmed in Dallas.

Dealey Plaza, still a key entry point into downtown, was blocked for several days last summer while the assassination was re-created. One newspaper columnist suggested it was a sign of maturity that many in the city were more concerned about traffic problems than Dallas' image.

County commissioners weren't so sure. Before allowing Mr. Stone to use the book depository, they extracted a promise that he would give them a private screening so they could decide whether they wanted credit, or a disclaimer.

Kennedy, the youngest man ever elected president, appeared triumphant in his trip through downtown Dallas that day. Cheering crowds lined the streets; a large luncheon crowd awaited at the Dallas Market Center.

Nellie Connally, Gov. John Connally's wife, had just remarked on how friendly the reception was — maybe the president had forgotten about the newspaper ads that accused him of treason.

The 21-foot-long 1961 Lincoln Continental turned right from Main Street onto Houston Street, and then a quick left onto Elm, right in front of the book depository.

Suddenly, shots were fired.

"Just as they turned (onto Elm), I heard the first explosion," says Mr. Allman, who is now a public relations consultant.

"That's still the descriptive term. It was not a thin, brittle sharp sound. It was a loud reverbrating sound. . . . While I was still wondering what was going on, a second and then a third."

In his first radio report, given from inside the book depository, Mr. Allman described it as "three loud, reverberating explosions."

The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald fired three shots from the book depository, and Mr. Allman says he saw people on the lower floors look up.

But many critics claim the fatal shots came from what is now known as the grassy knoll, a small rise down the street from the corner.

Mr. Stone's movie is expected to take a look at various conspiracy theories — especially those that feature the Central Intelligence Agency. The script is based on the book by Mr. Garrison, the former New Orleans District Attorney.

Mr. Allman believes the assassination "was a wound that has healed."

But, he says, "It was kind of puzzling to me why Dallas bore such a stigma when Los Angeles didn't for the death of Robert Kennedy and Memphis for Martin Luther King."

Perhaps it puzzles Mr. Allman, but to others, the 1968 murders of Robert Kennedy and King were just more proof that the insanity unleashed in Dealey Plaza was still loose.

Perhaps that is why Dealey Plaza still draws us. Still saddens us. Still burdens us.